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Bar, Law School to Investigate State of Indigent Defense Services

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BAR, LAW SCHOOL TO INVESTIGATE STATE OF INDIGENT DEFENSE SERVICES

Serious questions about the quality and cost effectiveness of criminal defense services for the county's poor has prompted the San Diego Law Center to form a blue ribbon commission that will undertake a five-month investigation of the situation.

The 15-member commission's first meeting, open to the press, is scheduled from 5-6 p.m. Thursday, Sept. 12.

On Tuesday, Sept. 10, the Board of Supervisors' appropriated \$23,000 to help finance the commission's study. Although the commission is independent from the county board, it will make recommendations to the supervisors and the Office of Defender Services on how to best deliver legal services to the indigent in criminal cases.

University of San Diego Law School Dean Sheldon Krantz and attorneys James Lorenz and John Mitchell, who helped form the commission, said the Law Center, a joint project of the law school and the County Bar Association, decided to take action because the county needs an independent assessment on contract services and future needs.

Lorenz, who chairs the commission, said serious allegations have been raised about the current contract

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system. "There is no reason why San Diego should not have excellent criminal defense services," he added.

Krantz said, "recently, there have been serious allegations stemming from national studies; allegations that border on scandalous...Given the disputes surrounding the ways in which public funds are now being used, the Law Center Board concluded that an immediate impartial study was warranted."

DeWitt Higgs, Law Center Board chairman who appointed this commission, said, "we asked a lot of community leaders to join the commission, and they all agreed."

In addition to Lorenz, Krantz and Mitchell, the commission includes USD Trustee Peter Hughes, San Diego Padres President Ballard Smith, federal judges Earl Gilliam and Edward Schwartz, Superior Court Judge David Gill, Bar Association President Melinda Lasater, attorneys Ramon Castro, E. Miles Harvey, Oscar Irwin, Elisabeth Semel and Hope Logan and Arthur Brodshatzer.

At Thursday's meeting, Lorenz and Krantz will outline the commission's responsibilities.

The meeting will take place at the law offices of Finley, Kumble and Wagner, 101 W. Broadway, Suite 1500 (the Wells Fargo Bank building).

For more information, please contact John Nunes at 260-4600, ext. 4296.

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